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LINCOLN

and

The Beginning of the Republican Party  
in Illinois.

BY

O. P. WHARTON.

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AN ADDRESS

Read Before the

ILLINOIS STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

at its

Annual Meeting, Evanston, Ill.,

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## LINCOLN AND THE BEGINNING OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY IN ILLINOIS.

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BY O. P. WHARTON.

To write a chapter of my knowledge of, and acquaintance with, Abraham Lincoln is to make it principally marked by brevity. I bought the Rock Island *Advertiser*, a Whig newspaper, early in September, 1853, and then first heard of him as the acknowledged leader of that party in Illinois, a man of marked honesty and sincerity of purpose, utterly devoid of demagoguism and trickery in politics. The year following the Rock Island railroad was completed through to the Mississippi river at Rock Island and a bridge across that river was built in 1855 and I was secretary of a meeting to lay the corner stone of the drawpier of that bridge. As soon as it was finished the St. Louis Merchants Association brought suit against the Bridge Company to compel the removal of the bridge as an obstruction to navigation. The suit was tried before Chief Justice McLean of the Supreme Court of the United States at Chicago. Abraham Lincoln was chief attorney for the Bridge Company and I was a witness in behalf of the Company, having been requested by Joseph Knox, resident attorney for it at Rock Island, to act in that capacity by assisting in testing the current of the river through the draw for the passage of boats. In this way I got more knowledge of the character of Lincoln, who conducted the case for the Bridge Company with such masterly ability that the opposition had no show of any consequence for its contention against the right to bridge the Mississippi river at any point where the interests of transportation east and west required such a structure.

But in 1856 I first became personally acquainted with Abraham Lincoln. The Whig editors of Illinois found themselves rather destitute of a party, and sought a way to get a new organization of one to fight the repeal of the Missouri Compromise with its design to extend slavery into Kansas, and, in fact, to make the holding of negroes as slaves in all the states of the Union legal, as the act of the Dred Scott decision of the Supreme Court of the United States declared that no negro could bring a suit in any court to gain his freedom from slavery because he was not a citizen entitled to sue in any court.

So the Whig editors of Illinois, to further their purpose of organizing such a new party, called a convention of themselves at Decatur in that State and invited Mr. Lincoln over from Springfield, his home, to meet with them for consultation and advice. I attended that convention, was put on the Committee on Resolutions, thus being brought into direct

contact with Lincoln, who proved a very genial and capable adviser indeed. If I remember rightly he was the author of the States' Rights Plank of the platform we drew up, and we were highly pleased with it. We ended the session by calling the convention to nominate a state ticket for the new party and complete its organization as a state and national party at Bloomington, May 29, following; this was done and Mr. Lincoln went there, made his first speech of adherence to the new Republican Party and it was victorious in the fall election.

When I next met Mr. Lincoln in convention it was at Springfield two years after the Bloomington nomination, where the state Republican delegates met, re-nominated the state ticket previously elected and nominated Lincoln himself for United States Senator to make that celebrated campaign against Stephen A. Douglas, author of the Missouri Compromise repealing act. It was at the Springfield Convention in 1858 that Lincoln made his memorable speech beginning with the scriptural quotation "A house divided against itself cannot stand." I was sitting on the steps of the rostrum of the Senate Chamber from which he spoke, and at the conclusion of his speech he sat down on the steps beside me and to my surprise demanded to know what I thought of it. Of course, I felt rather taken aback, but considering the brevity of his speech and its sudden conclusion, I replied that he had spoken too briefly—that he had made a brave speech, patriotic and pointed, but it seemed to me too lofty for his audience which appeared rather dazed by it and acted as though he had not said enough nor put enough of himself into it. It was plain that he should have said more to create enthusiasm and send the assembly away in a better humor. Lincoln responded that my criticism was perhaps correct as the audience did appear rather quiet, and that if I would write a resolution commending the re-nomination of the state ticket and the acts of the party during its brief existence, etc., he would offer it himself and make such further remarks as the case seemed to require. I wrote the resolution requested by him, and he did get up and offer it with some Lincoln-like remarks which had the effect desired and all went off apparently well satisfied. The truth came out afterwards that he had submitted his speech to some of his party associates and they had strongly advised him against making such a speech, for if he did Douglas would carry the state and win the Senatorship. There was not then at that time much anti-slavery sentiment among the voters of Illinois and his speech actually sounded the death knell of slavery in the United States if they were to remain united.

The result of the campaign was that Mr. Lincoln was beaten for the Illinois Senatorship, but his triumphant debate with Douglas made him President two years afterwards.

I never saw Mr. Lincoln after that Springfield Convention in 1858 and the way I happened to go to it was at the earnest request of Joseph Knox, of Rock Island, who was the regular delegate, as his proxy. I think Knox had a delicacy about going to the Convention as he knew Mr. Lincoln would be nominated for Senator against Douglas, and Knox had always previously been a warm partisan of Douglas and bitterly opposed to Lincoln as leader of the Whig party, and was, in fact, chief

orator for the Democratic party in Northern Illinois, and a public character of much prominence. He was, however, of Massachusetts birth and education and always opposed the extension of slavery, and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. In fact, he voted for Fremont, the first Republican candidate for President, and the Republican ticket always afterward.

Many stories of Lincoln I have heard and might repeat, but I will spare the reader further infliction on this subject.

O. P. WHARTON,

1242 Dewey Ave., Los Angeles, Cal.

April 14, 1911.

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